

THE  
GREAT IMPORTANCE  
AND  
PROPER METHOD  
OF  
CULTIVATING AND CURING  
RHUBARB  
IN  
BRITAIN,  
FOR  
MEDICINAL USES,  
WITH AN  
APPENDIX,

By SIR WILLIAM FORDYCE, M.D.F.R.S.

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L O N D O N :

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TO  
THE SOCIETY

FOR  
THE ENCOURAGEMENT  
OF

ARTS, MANUFACTURES, AND COMMERCE,

THE FOLLOWING ESSAY

TO PROMOTE AN OBJECT

SUGGESTED BY THE ZEAL,

AND HONOURED WITH THE PATRONAGE,

OF

THE SOCIETY,

IS MOST RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED

BY

THE AUTHOR.



## ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Writer of the following Pages, having in a long course of practice experienced, to his fullest satisfaction, the singular powers of the True Rhubarb, or Rheum Palmatum Linnæi Spec. Plant. adopted by the London and Edinburgh Dispensatories, for preventing, or removing many of the worst diseases, was ambitious to try whether it might not easily be brought within the reach of multitudes, who cannot now afford to purchase it, by promoting its general

neral Cultivation and Cure in our own country, so as either to supply the market sufficiently without foreign seed, or greatly to reduce the high prices of that which is imported.

With this view, he for a number of years past made all the enquiries he could into the subject. Their result led him to attempt repeated experiments in his own garden. These have at last succeeded to his wish. The Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, have been pleased to vote him, unanimously, a Gold Medal, as their premium, for rearing Three Hundred Plants of the  
True

True Palmated Rhubarb, in conformity to their Advertisment for the year 1791. Animated by their approbation, and feeling it his duty to his fellow-subjects, he now lays before the public such lights as he has been able to collect regarding the Culture and Preservation of this admirable Root ; and, in order to render it yet more extensively beneficial, he has taken the liberty to point out, in an Appendix, the manner of combining it with Tartar under various forms, so as at once to ensure and increase its efficacy.





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T H E

Great Importance *and* Proper Method

O F

CULTIVATING AND CURING

R H U B A R B, &c.

IT will not be denied, that the taste for luxury is become more than ever general and prevalent in this Country; that partly the indolence which is its common attendant, and partly the extreme mutability of the climate, prevent multitudes from taking proportioned exercise in open air; and that many of the most painful and dangerous diseases proceed from weakness and disorders in the Stomach and Bowels, always increased by intemperance. It will there-

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fore

fore be allowed, that if a Simple or Plant, possessing powers to correct those disorders, and strengthen that weakness, could be propagated amongst ourselves at an easy rate, so as to be purchased at small expence, it would be a circumstance highly grateful to every friend of humanity.

Such a Plant, we have the happiness to know, has been provided by the beneficence of Nature ; I mean Rhubarb, or Rheum Palmatum of the London Dispensatory 1788, so justly celebrated by the best physicians, both at home and abroad. We cannot however but regret, that hitherto it has not been cultivated in Britain with the care or skill requisite for producing any quantity worth a name, far less such a supply as could either save the country altogether its present expensive importation, or render the article so cheap as to be attainable

able by the great numbers who have not now the benefit of sharing in its salutary effects.

Before I proceed to the main object of this paper, it may be worth while, for the sake of those readers who are not acquainted with the history of Rhubarb, to observe, that though it had been long known, as a valuable article of commerce between Russia, Turkey, Persia, China, and England, it was left for Mr. Bell of Antermomy, a Scotch gentleman, who travelled from Peterburgh, in the suite of Mr. Ismayloff, Ambassador from that Court to Peking, in 1719, and the two following years, to inform us particularly where it was first discovered. “ Above the Sedmy-  
 “ palaty,” says he, “ near some ancient  
 “ tombs of the Tartars, towards the source  
 “ of the Irtysh, on the hills and valleys,  
 “ grows the best Rhubarb in the world,

“ without the least culture.” This river, which takes its rise from the Lake Korzan, in about 47 or 48 degrees of north latitude, passes down to Tobolski, the capital of Siberia; by which means the Kalmucks, who inhabit its banks, find an easy conveyance for the Rhubarb they collect there, to the Merchants from Russia. Mr. Bell saw it again in great abundance among the Mongal Tartars, on the banks of the Kara, that runs into the Baykall Lake, in what is called the Hungry Desert, under the dominion, and not far from the Wall, of China. Here, he informs us, he dug up as much as he wanted of it, with a stick, on hills where there are a great number of animals called Marmots, of a brownish colour, having feet like a badger, and nearly of the same size.

“ I should not,” he adds, “ have mentioned,

“ tioned an animal so well known as the  
 “ Marmot, had it not been on account of  
 “ the Rhubarb. Wherever you see ten or  
 “ twenty plants growing, you are sure to  
 “ find several burrows under the shade of  
 “ their broad spreading leaves. Perhaps  
 “ they may sometimes eat the leaves and  
 “ roots of this plant. However it is pro-  
 “ bable, the manure they leave about the  
 “ roots contributes not a little to its in-  
 “ crease; and their casting up the earth  
 “ makes it shoot out young buds, and  
 “ multiply.—It appears that the Mongals  
 “ never accounted it worth cultivating;  
 “ but that the world is obliged to the  
 “ Marmots for the quantities scattered at  
 “ random in many parts of this country.  
 “ For whatever part of the ripe seed hap-  
 “ pens to be blown among the thick grass,  
 “ can very seldom reach the ground, but  
 “ must there wither and die; whereas,  
 “ should

“ should it fall among the loose earth  
 “ thrown up by the Marmots, it imme-  
 “ diately takes root, and produces a new  
 “ plant.” This intelligent Traveller then  
 goes on to relate how it was prepared and  
 preserved for use. “ After digging and  
 “ gathering the Rhubarb, the Mongals  
 “ cut the large roots into small pieces, in  
 “ order to make them dry more readily.  
 “ In the middle of every piece they scoop  
 “ a hole, through which a cord is drawn,  
 “ in order to suspend them in any con-  
 “ venient place. They hang them for the  
 “ most part about their tents, and some-  
 “ times on the horns of their sheep. This  
 “ is a most pernicious custom, as it destroys  
 “ some of the best part of the root; for  
 “ all about the hole is rotten and useless.  
 “ Whereas, were people rightly informed  
 “ how to dig and dry this plant, there  
 “ would not be one pound of refuse in a  
 “ hun-



“ hundred ; which would save a great deal  
 “ of trouble and expence, that much di-  
 “ minish the profits on this commodity.  
 “ At present the dealers think these im-  
 “ provements not worthy of their attention,  
 “ as their gains are more considerable  
 “ on this than on any other branch of  
 “ trade. Perhaps the Government may  
 “ hereafter think it proper to make some  
 “ regulations with respect to this matter.—  
 “ I am persuaded, that, in such a dry cli-  
 “ mate as this, Rhubarb might easily be  
 “ so cultivated, as to produce any quantity  
 “ that could be wanted.”

The ingenious Mr. Dossie, who has writ-  
 ten on this subject with much information  
 and accuracy in *Memoirs of Agriculture*,  
 Vol. II. Art. 14. mentions, “ That the  
 Root in question is known among dealers  
 by the name of Turkey Rhubarb, because  
 it

it was originally imported into this country from the Levant. “ But since the extension  
 “ of the East-India Trade,” he observes,  
 “ it has been brought from China; and  
 “ on the commercial improvements made  
 “ in the Russian dominions, it has come  
 “ also through that channel.”

From the part of Mr. Bell's Narrative above quoted Mr. Dossie justly infers, what is very material on the point under consideration, that the soil of the country where the Rhubarb was discovered to prosper so remarkably, must be rich, since the grass it produces is so rank; and, at the same time, that it must be a light loam, since Mr. Bell was able to dig up the good part of the Rhubarb roots with the assistance of a stick only, and since the Marmots found means to loosen the earth around them; both of which operations  
 would



would have been scarcely possible, had the soil been clayey and strong. It would seem, indeed, from these circumstances put together, that the ground most proper for the production of this valuable plant requires to be light and rich at the same time.

The late Sir Alexander Dick, Baronet, President of the College of Physicians at Edinburgh, being acquainted with these particulars, and prompted by a zeal for the public good that strongly marked his character, was solicitous to try whether the culture of this salutary Root might not be introduced into Britain so effectually, as to answer the purposes of general utility before suggested. Full of the benevolent idea, he applied to a medical friend of his own, the late Dr. Mounsey at the Court of Peterburgh, with whom he corresponded, and

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who was fortunately in such high favour with the late Czar Peter, as to procure by the intervention of his Imperial Majesty an order for some of the best Rhubarb seeds to be sent to the Royal gardens at Peterburgh. There it prospered exceedingly, often producing seed within two or three years, and growing so fast as to gain not seldom, in the space of less than three weeks, the height of twelve or fourteen feet. It is in truth a very hardy plant; and, where it is thriving, shoots up in stems of great size and beauty.

After the Czar's death Dr. Mounsey brought home with him to Britain some of its seeds, and gave a part of them to Sir Alexander Dick, who took the most sedulous pains to raise the Plant in his own gardens at Prestonfield, and to dry its roots. Nor did he fail to distribute the  
seeds

seeds among such of his noble and learned friends as he thought would be best disposed and qualified to cherish his favourite object. Among the rest he imparted them to the late Duke of Athol, the Earl of Bute, and the late Dr. Hope of Edinburgh, my old fellow student there; of whom I cannot forbear saying, that whether regarded as a Botanist, a Physician, or a Man, he was an ornament to his country.

About seven years after the period to which I refer, I found plenty of the True Palmated Rhubarb in the Botanical Garden at Edinburgh, as well as in that of the amiable Baronet above named. From him I brought some both of the roots and of the seeds into England. From him too I learnt the method of airing and drying the roots to render them marketable. This was the great desideratum for its becoming

an article of commerce in our own Island, and not, as before, merely a matter of curiosity.

The Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, had offered a premium to the person who should, in a satisfactory manner, describe the process of *curing* it. But the offer was confined to South Britain. I used the freedom, however, to assure Sir Alexander, that the liberality of Englishmen would not permit them to suffer an object of such general importance, to be pursued successfully in another part of the Island, without some mark of their approbation ; and I undertook to lay his memorial on this subject before the Society. On considering it, they very readily got over the obstacle of form, and voted him the Gold Medal, which I had the pleasure of transmitting to him.

Whence

Whence it happens that the cultivation of this Root, as an article of public utility, is still generally neglected, I know not ; unless it be the supposed difficulty attending the drying of it. I have been told, that not less than £.200,000 is paid annually for Rhubarb imported into this country : and it is likely to cost yet more, if not propagated by ourselves, as modern luxury daily increases.

It is certain, that the enormous quantity of butter, in all its different forms and uses, constantly devoured by vast numbers of both sexes ; with every species of fat foods and heavy ales, besides porter ; want of due exercise, and the pernicious custom of late hours, and jading attendance on gay assemblies and card-tables, infinitely hurtful to health ; it is certain, I say, that all these, with other causes which might be  
named,

named, concur in rendering extraordinary aids to digestion necessary. But what aids so natural, safe, or efficacious, as Vegetable Bitters, as well as Vegetable Acids?

Convinced that the former are peculiarly calculated, when properly combined with other ingredients, to supply the deficiency of Bile, and of the Pancreatic Juice, I was led to bestow particular attention upon the culture of Rhubarb, after the lights I had received concerning it: and a sample of its roots, which grew in my own garden on Putney-heath, I took the liberty of exhibiting to the Society, encouraged by a Certificate from the Drug-gists in the City, that they had found it of superior goodness, as well as the First English Specimen which they had seen of true marketable Rhubarb, or the *Rheum Palmatum*



Palmatum of the Dispensatory. For this the Society honoured me with a Letter of Thanks.

I am aware, that some of those who are interested in the high prices of Rhubarb from Turkey, Russia, and China, have still had the address to call the Rhubarb raised in this country an inferior sort. But among persons of enquiry and candour, time will, as usual in other instances, bring forth truth.

It now remains for me to explain, how the plant in question may be propagated with most ease, in greatest abundance, and with the greatest certainty ; and how the Root may be perfectly cured, so as to preserve all its strength. To this attempt I am emboldened, by having last summer raised more than Three Hundred  
Plants,

Plants, and afterwards transplanted them in a thriving condition, according to the Rules and Orders of the Society, with the proper certificates.

As soon as I had seed enough for the purpose of making experiments, I sowed it in a hot-bed, and when it had shot up with three or four seed-leaves, I planted it out in an east and south-east exposure, where ground unmanured, or not too rich, is least apt to breed the fly ; to which indeed this Plant is more subject than even the Turnip. It must not be concealed, that from the same cause, or from the untowardness of the season, scarcely more than three or four in a dozen have, for the most part, succeeded. On the whole, it has answered best, when sown in the situation now mentioned, during the last half of the month of March, or

in



in April, or even as far as the end of May; or yet later, if the spring has proved cold and dry. It may be also transplanted during the whole course of the summer. Sets likewise from the more abundant stems will often succeed very well, and even the Tap-root, in the deepest mould, and where the upper part is already fit to be cut into slices of two inches in depth and three in breadth, before the Plant has pushed out its rapid stems.

With regard to the time of taking up the Roots; that may be done with safety, when it shews its first growth, or as soon as it has feeded, or when the seed is ripened, or at any period in the last quarter of the year, or in the first of the ensuing. Though it may be taken up, dried, and used at the end of four years, it will not, how properly soever managed, possess that

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solidity which is necessary for its excellence. It will be found in its most perfect state at the end of seven years, and after that age, if it has been carefully cultivated and skilfully cured.

This last operation must be conducted in the following manner. As soon as a Root, weighing from three or four to seventy pounds, is dug up, let it be washed till it is thoroughly clean. Let the fibrous roots be taken away, and not the smallest particle of bark left on the large ones. Let these be cut into square pieces, as nearly as they will admit, of four inches in breadth, and one and a half in depth. Let a hole be made in the middle of each, about half an inch square. Then let them be strung upon a packthread, with a knot on each, and at such a distance from one another, as to keep them from rubbing or entangling.

entangling. Thus secured, let them be hung up in the form of a festoon, without delay, in the warm air of a Kitchen or Laundry, till the superfluous moisture is exhaled, in order to prevent their becoming mouldy, or any way musty. They may be afterwards sufficiently dried at more leisure, then wrapt separately in cotton, and put into a bottle with a wide mouth.

Let it be observed here, by the way, that the tap-roots, next to the roots themselves, make excellent tinctures: of them too, as well as the parings dried and powdered, I have frequently given half an ounce, with double the quantity of Cream of Tartar, to my horses each day, on finding the crust of their blood deeply tinged with bile, and that for three or four days running. Of such blood every

race-horse would be the better for losing a part, the day after running, unless he is to run again very soon.

By following with steady attention the rules now specified, for the culture and cure of Rhubarb, all who are possessed of a garden, or spot of ground, however inconsiderable, will have it in their power to raise and prepare for themselves, or others, one of the most useful simples, or medicinal vegetables, hitherto known. And it is pleasing to think, that while persons of rank and affluence are often indulging in the contents of the wine-cask so freely as to hurt their own health, the poorest and lowest of the people may be enabled to mend theirs, when impaired from very different causes, by mixing Rhubarb with the Tartar that adheres to the empty cask : for when this is done in  
due

due proportions, and with the necessary preparations, they form together some of the most sovereign remedies ever invented, for the relief and comfort of the human constitution. Of those preparations, and those proportions, I will now, by way of Appendix, point out some of the most important; leaving it to others, whose more immediate business it is, to explain the several particulars with minute exactness. This addition to the subject properly before me I am willing to make, that nothing may be wanting, on my part, towards the diffusion of so great a blessing; since Rhubarb, however excellent on the whole, is in many cases, if given alone, too heating, and requires tartareous preparations, as proper correctors of that quality.

## APPENDIX.

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## A P P E N D I X:

THE benefit of Rhubarb would doubtless become more widely extensive, if the great and wealthy would, at little or no expence to themselves, order their apothecaries to supply their indigent neighbours, the state of whose health might require it, with the Tartar before mentioned, from their empty wine-casks. Or, if it is not the fortune of such poor to enjoy that benefit, still they may have the comfort of knowing that they can purchase a pound of Cream of Tartar in powder, at a small price, from the apothecary, in every country-town throughout England.



1st, Of this Cream of Tartar, let half an ounce be dissolved in a quart of boiling water; of which let the patient drink one half every twenty-four hours, giving, in a cup-full of it, ten grains of powder of the same Rhubarb, twice or thrice within that space of time.

2. Burn two or three ounces of this same Cream of Tartar in a crucible, till it is red hot, and you have a salt which, powdered in a marble mortar, and whilst hot and dry poured into a bottle well corked, is as good as the Salt of Wormwood. Give twenty grains of this, dissolved in three table spoonfuls of water and one table spoonful of lemon-juice; and you have one of the most useful febrifuges known in all hot fevers, if taken four or five times within the twenty-four hours.

3. Mix

3. Mix as much of the salt with some of the above solution of the Cream of Tartar, till the effervescence is over, and you have tartarised Tartar, of such wonderful use in the cure of remitting fevers, jaundice, anasarca, obstructions of the liver, hypochondres, delirium, melancholy, and even what is called madness, if that be not hereditary.

Add a proper quantity of distilled vinegar to a due proportion of the above Salt of Tartar, and you have the regenerated Tartar or Diuretic Salt, known even to Pliny the natural historian, and whose powers are extolled so highly by our best chymists, Hoffman, Boerhaave, and our most eminent physicians, Huxham, Fothergill, and innumerable other practitioners, not to name the wonderful combination of Rhubarb with the different preparations

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tions from Tartar, which is more than sufficient to justify my saying, that until an universal Febrifuge be discovered, it is as a second Alkahest for the cure of the most afflicting and stubborn diseases, whether acute or chronical.

5. Mix a quarter of an ounce of Rhubarb in powder with three quarters of an ounce of the Cream of Tartar, into the form of a linctus, with oxymel of squills. A tea spoonful of this, taken twice or thrice a day, is one of the best medicines for a dropsy hitherto known.

6. Add sixty grains of our Rhubarb to as much of the Salt of Tartar, boil them for a quarter of an hour in six ounces of water in a tin saucepan, strain it through blotting paper ; and you have what one of the best writers on the \* *Materia Medica*

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calls

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\* Wolfgangii Wedelii Amœnitates Materiæ Medicæ.

calls *Anima Rhabarbari*. One tea spoonful of this given once a day to a child of a year old, twice a day to one of twenty-four months old, and three times a day to one a year older, is one of the best compositions as yet known for strengthening the stomach and bowels of little children, and preventing the big bellies, rickety joints and limbs, incident to their age.

7. Put half an ounce of the fibrous roots of our Rhubarb mentioned above, with two drachms of this same Salt of Tartar, into a bottle of brandy, or as much anise-feed water; and you have an excellent tincture and domestic medicine for the wind cholic.

And lastly, if the reader is not tired of my encomiums on Tartar (though this particular article has nothing to do with the above combinations of Tartar and

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Rhubarb) let a proper proportion of the Tartar be mixed with pure sea-sand, or flints powdered, and made into a glass bottle with a glass stopper; and all the above preparations will be preserved in their active state in any country, or climate, for fifty years.

To sum up the whole, you will find, under the names of Kali præparatum, Kali tartarifatum, *vulgo* Tartar. solubile, Tinctura rhabarbari, and other *formulae* in the new Pharmacopœia Londinensis, qualities of such efficacy in the disorders above specified, as nothing perhaps but long practice can hinder being pronounced the suggestion of fancy, rather than the result of sound knowledge and real experience.

T H E     E N D.

*The following Works, by the same Author, are published by T. CADELL.*

1. A New Enquiry into the Causes, Symptoms, and Cure, of Putrid and Inflammatory Fevers, Fourth Edition, 4s. bound.
2. A Review of the Venereal Disease, and its Remedies, Fifth Edition, 3s. sewed.
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